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SCIENCE

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THE NATURE OF MAN¹

A FEW years ago, as you may remember, Elie Metchnikoff published a book entitled "The Nature of Man: Studies in Optimistic Philosophy." If you have read that interesting work, you know that it is chiefly concerned with the great problem of death—with the problem, that is, of adjusting human emotions and human understanding satisfactorily to the common doom of living creatures. In Metchnikoff's view that problem has been mainly responsible for the existence of religions and philosophies. In his belief religions and philosophies have not been able to deal with the problem satisfactorily; but their failure, says he, is no reason for despair; for it is his conviction—and here we see why he deemed his study to be one in optimistic philosophy—that the problem can be satisfactorily solved by science and in particular by the science of biology, for the process of dying is one of the processes of life. And so his book aims at being an important contribution to what may be called the science or the philosophy of death.

I hope that this address upon "The Nature of Man" may appear to you, as it appears to me, to be, likewise, a study, or the result of a study, in optimistic philosophy. It is not of death, however, that I intend to speak, but of life. I desire to look towards the possibility—to contemplate the possibility—of a valid philosophy, or a science, of human life.

The core of my message is a certain concept—a concept regarding the essential nature of man. The concept is, I believe, both new and important—strictly new, if I be not mistaken, and tremendously important. This judgment I may express with propriety because the idea

¹ Address at the annual meeting of the Phi Beta Kappa Society, Columbia University, May 31, 1921.